CHEVROLET HOUSE IN THE SUBURB PRIMEVAL

(Ben Franklin, 1967, from *Garrett Park, A History of The Town From Its Beginnings To 1970*; Town of Garrett Park, 1974, Barbara Shidler Editor)

"Woodbine" was the smallest of the "little architectural gems" that Maddux, Marshall and Co. proposed to build in Garrett Park.

For the first time in American history, in 1920 the rural population of the United States was down to less than 50 percent of the total population. In that year of Warren Gamaliel Harding, the "Red Scare," and Sacco and Vanzetti, it was hard to tell whether Garrett Park was rural or urban, or even suburban (a new and still unsettled word then). The town population declined between 1910 and 1920. So bucolic was probably more like it.

The town's 159 residents had some paved streets, some household electricity, no sewers, constant problems with outhouses and chicken houses, and such unwanted cosmopolitan tendencies as baseball on Sundays. The blasphemy of Sunday baseball was prohibited by an ordinance of June 10, 1922. But the fight begun by the Town Council that year for an incandescent street light at the intersection of "the county road" (Strathmore Avenue) and Rockville Pike--then a two-lane highway second in the entire State of Maryland only to U.S. Route I--was to last more than 18 years, into the World War II period, and the two-room Garrett Park School was still a far off glimmer of 1928.

In the mid-20s residents still put their furnace cinders in potholes, and the skyline was dotted with windmills. There was a skinny-dipping swimming hole beyond "The Dip" (now Wells Park) and across the tracks. Rock Creek was crystal clear then, and Alton L. Wells, a long-time benefactor of the town who arrived in 1925, remembers standing lookout there for the boys' club he organized to thwart periodic epidemics of juvenile vandalism. "The girls are coming!" was the required warning.

Into this sylvan wilderness in the post-war summer of 1924, during the reign of Mayor Ben Durr, came a syndicate of retired military men, lately incorporated as Maddux, Marshall & Co., real estate developers. They came with novel ideas. Garrett Park would be the perfect site to mass produce low-cost housing for "military people and others of modest means"--"the realization of the dream of the family of small income . . . in an environment fit for millionaires."

To Brig. Gen. R. C. Marshall, the general manager of the Associated General Contractors of America, Maj. H. Cabot Maddux, a retired Army physician, Cdr. O. M. Mallory, U.S.N., and Col. James A. Moss, Garrett Park in the early 1920s was "like unto 'The Dim Lantern'--twinkling through the fog of uncertainty; glimmering beyond the mist of city dust and dirt and din--a

beacon of ambition realized,hope fulfilled." The partners eventually lost their shirts, a surviving officer recently recalled. But their experiment left a lasting mark.

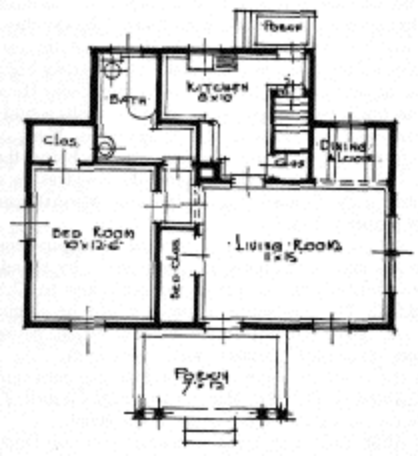
The 18-page Maddux, Marshall & Co. brochure describing their "residential-park development of charm and distinction" reflected a new ideology, just beginning to become prevalent--that the mass-produced flivver was a great urban boon because it expanded the frontiers of the city. Quoting I Kings, Maddux, Marshall--Co.'s expansive literature reminded prospects that the prophets had writ: "They shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree." It introduced Garrett Park as a sort of private-enterprise commune, with "automobility" thrown in.

To improve the living conditions of the family of moderate means, placing within their reach ownership of home, fireside entertainment, enjoyment of charming environment, pleasure of one's own car, and other elements of Human Happiness - such is the Impelling Idea back of the development of beautiful, rustic Garrett Park, the Suburb Ideal.

That was Maddux, Marshall's credo. Besides, the developers noted thoughtfully, "a husband and wife who own their own home are more apt to save. They find a stimulant in earning and saving to pay for their home and making it attractive." Indeed, love of home was one of the finest instincts of our people, said President Coolidge, "the foundation of our national and individual well-being."

The brief epoch of Maddux, Marshall & Co. brought enormous change to the village that later came to be known as "the Left Bank of Rock Creek." The company had the impact of a localized, concentrated F.H.A., adding nearly 50 houses to the tax rolls in less than a decade and accomplishing its revolution among "the class of men and women who constitute the backbone of the Nation" with a canny promotional zeal that matched its lyrical appreciation of the suburb primeval.

The company offered three styles of one-story houses, each with a built-in, two-tube radio ("can be made more powerful by the addition, at small cost, of another two-tube section") and, as an option to be included in the mortgage, a garage and a Chevrolet - roadster, touring car, coupe or sedan. The automobile option was said to be a "first" in real estate development promotion. The basic price of the two-bedroom model Roseland was $4,950. A garage could be added for just $150, and a Chevrolet cost $708 to $820, depending upon the model chosen.



In its enthusiasm for a sturdy, homey community "of modest means," Maddux, Marshall & Co., however, underestimated the taste and discrimination of the existing village of big, old houses. The company had persuaded the Town Council to begin a long, frustrating battle with the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission for the extension of water lines and the installation of sewers. It had even convinced the Council to float a $5,000 bond issue, redeemable through a new Town road tax, to improve the "macadamized streets." By October 1924, the fruit of this municipal sacrifice was already souring. It was not the crack in the picture window--yet to be invented. It was the squeak in the Murphy bed.

Mayor Durr began receiving complaints that the "Chevy Houses" were beneath Garrett Park--too small, too cheap, too cramped for idyllic suburban life, with their Murphy beds concealed in closets in the living rooms. Word of the complaints brought Maj. Maddux and Col. Moss somewhat anxiously before the Council meeting of October 11, 1924, with what the minutes described as "a rousing speech of assurance to convince the Council that Maddux and Marshall were sincere in their desire to improve property values."

In person, and a few days later in a letter, the developers promised to "allay all apprehension on the part of residents of Garrett Park" by abandoning the $4,950 house (three were finished) and escalating the next three to $7,500 and the three following to $8,500. The one-bedroom model would be eliminated, "except in unusual cases." At least one lot would be left vacant between houses. And henceforth "more expensive" houses would be built. "As you can readily understand, in a real estate development of this kind one must carefully feel his way lest he run on financial rocks," Maj. Maddux wrote the Council. The rocks were not far off. But while the real estate "idyll" lasted, it was grand.

Mabel and Alton Wells were living in an apartment near Dupont Circle in 1925 when they met Col. Moss. "I want you to come out and see a division we've started, a little sylvan village started by artists and musicians," the Wellses recall Col. Moss telling them. "So we came out and looked at the house across the street from the Clevelands' (11121 Rokeby Avenue, in 1974 the Leafs').Dick Cleveland was in diapers then, and the house wasn't even finished," Mr. Wells recalls. "But,I said, that's the house for us and we bought it--$1,000 down and $3,950 to carry, not including a garage. But it included the radio and the car. Oh, the car was stylish!" [Ed. note: though Mr. Wells was correctly quoted, his memory was faulty. The pace did not include a car.]

"There was a trolley car, too, that ended in Ken-Gar, and people used to walk from there to Garrett Park. The only houses west of the Clevelands' were George and Peg Normans' (4701 Clyde) and Mrs. Kemeys' (11307 Kenilworth, in 1974 the Jarmys'); and, beyond that, there was just old 'Uncle Bob' Gross."

"Uncle Bob," an elderly Negro, must have been among the First Families of Garrett Park. For more than two and a half decades, from the teens to the 1940s, the municipal disbursements,

recorded in small-change detail in the Council minutes show payments of $2 and, in better times, $3 a day to "Robert Gross" for labor on town streets and trees.

"They had a beautiful train that went into town in mid-morning," Mrs. Wells recalled. "The women could go to town at 10:30,and there was another train in the mid-afternoon so they could get home in time to fix dinner. The station was a very busy place. All the baggage for Georgetown Preparatory School came there--and Eddie Wallach, the B &O stationmaster, was a busy man."

"The talk of the town then," as the Wellses remember, was small town stuff. "Mrs. Donnelly, who lived in the big house at the top of Donnelly's Hill (Argyle and Kenilworth, in 1974 the Kornbergs') used to {et her chickens out to scratch before sunset. One night Mrs. Dye (11013 Montrose, in 1974 the Damtofts') or her son shot some of them. Oh, that was a to-do! There was already an ordinance against chickens running loose. Then they passed an ordinance against firing guns."

"Then there were two old spinster sisters who lived on Kenilworth (11018, in 1974 the Stephensons') and the kids used to bother them on Halloween. So they had buckets of water upstairs to pour down on anyone who came. Well, there was some miscalculation and one sister ran a bucket of water down her sister's neck. The kids never got over talking about that."

Something else that the kids never got over talking about were the nights the Marine brigade camped in Corbys' cornfield west of town. The East Coast Expeditionary Forces marched from Washington, D.C. to Gettysburg, where they re-enacted Pickett's charge, and back between mid-June and July 1922. The first day's march brought them to what is now Garrett Park Estates, and their camp extended from Strathmore north to the creek. The brigade included infantry, tanks, horse-drawn ambulances, and even a small squadron of planes, some of which took off and landed on a strip behind the Lewis house (11210 Kenilworth, in 1974 the Edlunds). Ralph Donnelly, a boy of nine at that time (11019 Kenilworth, in 1974 the Kornbergs'), remembers the intense excitement of the kids who hung around the camp. Though the Marines were here for only one night enroute to Gettysburg and one night on the way back to Quantico, their visit was a high spot in the lives of the kids of the early Twenties.

By 1926, during the term of Mayor Lewis W. Call, there were nearly 100 families in Garrett Park. That October, the Town Council formally petitioned the County Board of Education for a two-room school, to be erected on four acres donated by Mr. and Mrs. Carl 1. Corby, former owners of the acreage south of town which is now Holy Cross Academy and Convent and the Grosvenor Park Apartments. The Garrett Park School opened in the fall of 1928 with one teacher and 42 students. Black Tuesday--"the Crash" of October 29, 1929--would mark its first anniversary, reduce its enrollment and budget, and threaten it through most of the 30s with imminent abandonment by the County.

During the 1920s, high school children went back and forth to town with their parents, morning and evening, and enrolled in the District of Columbia schools. Ralph Donnelly remembers vividly his wintry rides to the old Columbia High School in Miss Ruth Rucker's open touring car. The Misses Rucker (they lived at 10807 Kenilworth, in 1974 the Vernicks') both taught in the

District Schools. Some children took the train to Gaithersburg High. The afternoon "school train," No. 64, leaving Gaithersburg at 3:15 p.m., was abandoned in 1928, however, and the curtailment of train service continued through the Depression years.

George J. Moss, the Silver Spring real estate man whose uncle was the Col. James A. Moss of Maddux, Marshall &Co., recalled in an interview recently, that the company-- by then called Maddux, Marshall, Moss & Mallory--had branched ambitiously into scattered apartment and hotel properties in the late 20s. Construction in Garrett Park, where the company's houses are still called "4-M" as well as "Chevy" houses, was accompanied by a constant counterpoint of sewerage crises because the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission had still not laid the promised trunk lines. Building had gone more slowly than the directors hoped. "We picked just the wrong time to expand," Mr. Moss said recently. "The Depression hit us very hard, particularly in our apartments and hotels. We liquidated as gracefully as we could. But we all lost our shirts. We were badly scorched."

The decade that ended in 1929 with the inauguration of Herbert Hoover, the St. Valentine's Day gangland massacre, the cornerstone laying of the Empire State Building, and the invention of the "foolproof" coin-operated vending machine had been a period of unmatched growth for Garrett Park. The town population grew nearly 90 percent while generally-rural Montgomery County lost 18 per cent of its people. There were still no sewers. The Maddux, Marshall, Moss & Mallory houses proved to have defective septic systems. But the new Mayor, Richard H. Akers, elected in May 1928, put a game face on what must have seemed the best of times and the worst of times. He appeared elegantly at community gatherings, in a dinner jacket.

Ben Franklin, 1967